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A general essay on the nature and scope of the Negro history movement and a review of publications dealing with the history of the Negroes are presented. The publications include: The Struggle for Freedom and Rights; Basic Facts About the Negro in American History by the Public Schools of the District of Columbia; and The Negro in American History by the Board of Education, City of New York.

The Negro history movement is concerned with the contributions of individual Negroes throughout history, the effects of past oppressions involving both Negroes and whites, the story of the struggle for equality, the nature of the African heritage, and the full extent to which history has been distorted or suppressed in order to create and preserve racism.

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TOKENS OF TRUTH

Howard N. Meyer

[*A review-essay on Detroit Public Schools,* The Struggle for Freedom and Rights: Basic Facts About the Negro in American History. Detroit, *1963; Public Schools of the District of Columbia, The Negro in American History. (A curriculum resource bulletin for secondary schools.) 1964; Board of Education-City of New York.* The Negro in American History. Curriculum Bulletin 1964-65 Series. No. 4. 1964.]

The author, an attorney who edited Higginson's Army Life in a Black Regiment, *will have his young adult biography of Ulysses S. Grant published by Macmillan this summer.*

The emancipated white Southerner can often recognize truths that many Northern white liberals will lag in perceiving. Gerald W. Johnson, for example, found the explanation for 1964's Mississippi murders in "the policy, pursued for generations by the proper gentlemen of Mississippi, of controlling and manipulating the wool-hat boys, the rednecks, the lintheads, by stuffing them with lies that blind their eyes to the real world." More specifically, Prof. James W. Silver, critic of the closed society, has asserted that it "has two engines designed to insure the maintenance of white supremacy: the distortion of Mississippi's past and the distortion of Mississippi's present."

Mississippi, however, as Howard Zinn wrote recently, is "not an oddity in a glass case, but a particularly ugly reflection of the rest of the country," As to distortion of the past, six California historians whose report was reproduced in these pages (*Integrated Education,* No. 11) declared that the school textbooks most widely used in California contain distortions of history that "help perpetuate and intensify the pattern of racial discrimination," and reinforce "notions among whites of their superiority." The California critique said nothing new to students of "Negro History" and in order to help evaluate three pamphlet supplements that have been issued in the past year and a half in response to prior complaints, it is desirable to review briefly the nature and scope of the Negro History movement.

Just as racism in the United States is not a mere unfortunate accident or aberration, historical distortion that helps to "perpetuate and intensify" racism did not occur by chance or oversight. The "Confederate myth" and the "Reconstruction myth," to use Prof. Silver's phrases, did not originate merely as a reflection of prejudice or as rationalizations for an iniquitous socio-economic structure. They have been part of an "engine" employed by that structure to protect and extend itself. The nature of the end-product of this engine is reflected in the question so often attributed to the so-called "backlash"—a question that could not be asked by anyone with knowledge of the truth of American history: "Why are they pushing so fast?"

Negro protest and "revolt" have had a history far longer and more intense than most white liberals have been educated to acknowledge. Some of the protestants long ago recognized the role of historical falsehood in the maintenance of interracial injustice. Negro abolitionists helped re-discover the role of the Negro in the American Revolution; one of them, William Wells Brown, published a glimpse of the African history that is so assiduously being re-excavated today;

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and one emancipated white Southerner, Moncure Daniel Conway, retrieved during the 1860's, the story of Benjamin Banneker from obscurity.

Just half a century ago the effort to combat racism by the spread of historical truth took organized form. Shortly after the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was founded, the editor of its periodical *The Crisis* wrote: "What this nation and this world need is a Renaissance of reverence for the truth." It was almost as if in answer to these words of Dr. W. E. B. DuBois that Dr. Carter G. Woodson withdrew from a promising academic career to launch, in September, 1915, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. Dr. Woodson saw, as DuBois had, that the truth about the past and the present was inseparable and indistinguishable. He saw that the falsehoods about the past performance of his people and their relationship with the dominant whites helped create the myths and stereotypes as to present condition and capacity. Such myths, in turn, perpetuated enslavement by perpetuating the prejudices that enslaved the minds of all Americans—all but a very few.

What is so often referred to as "Negro History" is not merely or even primarily the cataloguing of the achievements of individual Negroes,—"the contributions," as it is sometimes bland put, that "minorities have made to our society." with the Negro as just another minority. A reference by Dr. Woodson in the preface to the first edition of his work *The Negro in Our History*, is illuminating in the search for a broader, more accurate, definition: "the history of the United States as it has been influenced by the presence of the Negro in this country." To this should be added Professor Reddick's subsequent qualification that "Negro History" differs from the mere study of the Negro in that—among other things—Negro History has a *'purpose'*."

The full scope and extent of that purpose may be discerned in an analytical study of the work published in the *Journal of Negro History*, a periodical founded by Dr. Woodson to publish and to encourage the work of scholars, and thereby to offer resource material for the crusading activities of the lay members of the Association. In addition to (a) the "contributions" above referred to, that is, the restoration to the level of attention that their intrinsic worth deserves of the individual achievements of artists, scientists, and others who have been ignored because they were Negroes, there are at least four additional categories of material of significance, namely, the whole truth about —

(b) the character, scope, and residual effects of past oppressions as involving both Negroes and whites;

(c) the story of the struggle for equality by and in behalf of the Negro and the contribution of that struggle to the making of a better society for all Americans;

(d) the nature of the African heritage;

(e) the full extent to which history itself has been falsified, distorted, or suppressed, as a tool for the creation and preservation of the prejudices on which racism is based.

Illustrative of the range of subject matter that can and should be reached, and its importance to all Americans, is a little-known aspect of the history of the Fourteenth Amendment

> When the white power structure calls upon the Negro to reject violence but does not impose upon itself the task of creating necessary social changes, it is in fact asking for submission to injustice. Nothing in the theory of nonviolence counsels this suicidal course. The simple fact is that there cannot be nonviolence and tranquillity without significant reforms of the evils that endangered the peace in the first place.
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> —Martin Luther King, Jr.
> November 7, 1964

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to the Federal Constitution. In tracing the origins of the Amendment, in a study published in the *Columbia Law Review*, two scholars pointed out that Charles Sumner's 1849 argument in *Roberts v Boston* was the "first known use in English of the phrase 'equality before the law.'" They told of how, shortly after Sumner's presentation, the abolitionist movement published it as a pamphlet, and they suggest that this may well have led to the incorporation of the key phrase "equal protection of the laws" in the text of the Fourteenth Amendment. (Appropriately enough, *Learning Together*, a unique collection of materials on school integration, opens with the relevant portion of Sumner's address.) Nevertheless, in reviewing for a leading weekly with pretensions of both liberalism and intellectuality, the biography that was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for 1961, a Professor of History at the University of Chicago wrote: "During the first fifty years of his life Sumner made not one solid constructive contribution to American politics . . . . Professor Donald's story shows an opportunist who was entranced by the sound of his own voice, paralyzed by his own virtue, and who made martyrdom into valuable political capital." The reviewer might have been spared the embarassment of having been led into such gross error had he been acquainted with Dr. Louis Ruchames' study in the April, 1953 *Journal of Negro History*, dealing with "Charles Sumner and American Historiography."

Proper and adequate as a slogan to enlist Negro scholars and lay members in a cause, "Negro History" becomes, in the context of the foregoing analysis and the cited illustration inadequate to define the eventual objective. When one reflects on the number and variety of the paths that must be pursued in exploring the five branches of the subject outlined above, it becomes evident that nothing short of total reconstruction of American history can do justice to the whole truth. As Staughton Lynd suggested in his October 1963 *Journal of Negro History* essay "On Turner, Beard and Slavery," emphases that have survived from the period when Turner accepted racial injustice as an appropriate foundation for our society, or the period when Beard accepted racial interiority as convenient to advance and explain a thesis, must be abandoned, and slavery viewed "as a key to the meaning of our national experience." Only then will Charles Sumner be accepted, as he should, as a historic figure whose life and work have more meaning for today than Webster, Clay, and Calhoun,—and Harriet Tubman as a *national* and not just a Negro heroine, one who, as Dr. Butler Jones has suggested, is fully entitled to be regarded as an American Joan of Arc.

In his notable *Nation* essay, "Farewell to Liberals" (which was reprinted as a public service by the NAACP) Loren Miller spotlights the difficulties faced by the liberal confronted by racial discrimination that has become deeply rooted and thoroughly institutionalized in local, state, and federal governmental machinery, and throughout the vast array of volutary organizations that make up our society. A comparable task faces the historian and educator, if the thesis that I have suggested is valid, namely that the needs and the effects of racism have so permeated and dominated American historiography as to require a total restructuring and reorganization of what is currently offered in the one or two volume works offered as dealing with the subject. And if this thesis has validity, the inadequacy of the pamphlet supplement remedy becomes glaringly apparent. *It is the integration of America's heritage that is called for, not the grudging concession of token truths.*

The economic problems of the text book industry, faced with regional threats of boycott, are monotonously referred to in an attempt to extenuate past sins and explain the "impossibility' 'of thoroughgoing overhaul. I daresay that the capacity of the industry to serve the cause of truth, scholarship, and justice would show a tremendous upsurge if school boards

were to show some gumption,—and take the course that our national interest requires: namely, the immediate cancellation of all current contracts for the acquisition of history texts with *any* racist-revisionist content, and the complete abandonment of the use of existing stocks of such texts. One is schooled, ordinarily, only once in a lifetime, and it would be far better for our children to be led through the hazards of a bookless course, than to have employed books that purvey falsehoods that perpetuate racialism: notions of "superiority" for whites and of "inferiority" for Negroes.

Any number of difficulties will occur to one considering this rather drastic suggestion. One of the foremost and most perplexing is that it will require a kind of "operation bootstrap." That is to say, pending the replacement of the objectionable text the conduct of history classes and related work in the elementary and secondary schools would be in the hands of the very administrators who themselves are products of the training that produced the writers of the textbooks of which we complain. Ordinarily when a particular group of texts has become totally obsolete and a period of transition has to be faced, adequate material in mimeographed form can be produced within the school system itself, supplemented by judicious use of readings in the paperbacks that now proliferate. However, one is troubled at the evidence given in the new supplements under review that the responsible administrators in Detroit and particularly in New York have not the capacity to surmount(or employ the assistance of aids who can surmount) the handicap presented by a lifetime of permeation with questionable myths and sterotypes. The District of Columbia product, representing the efforts of a team of educators who have themselves been associated with the A.S.N.L.H., and who are acquainted with the resources richly abounding in the *Journal of Negro History*, offers more promise. (It is a measure of the expertise of the New York Deputy Superintendents' Headquarters Committee that was responsible for its publication that Carter G. Woodson is only mentioned as an afterthought in a passage dealing with the Harlem Renaissance [sic] and that the *Journal of Negro History* is not mentioned at all.)

> There are today less than 2,750 living Negro college graduates in the United States; and less than 1,000 Negroes in college.
>
> W. E. B. DuBois, 1901

This is not to suggest that the New York and Detroit publications do not make an effort to reach for the truth, an effort hampered in each case by the ingrown quality of the product. The very title of the Detroit pioneer pamphlet—"The Struggle for Freedom and Rights"— is indicative of the sincerity of the effort of the responsible personnel to respond to the criticisms of the very alert NAACP chapter whose protest about the content of the text, *Our United States*, led to the breakthrough. Unfortunately, the very announcement of the publication of the pamphlet, designed as a supplemental reader for the eighth grade level, stressed that the objectionable basic text would continue to be used. One questions a state of affairs in which the young teenager is told to read, on the one hand, a massive, hardbound, slickpaper text which states: "The new state governments set up under the Reconstruction Act were shamefully inefficient," and on the other a pamphlet which declares "There were many good laws passed by the new [Reconstruction] governments."

Strongest in its handling of the slavery and Civil War periods, the Detroit publication falters and slips into error precisely at the crucial transition period that John Hope Franklin has dubbed "Reconstruction: Confederate Style." The reference to the Negro soldier in the Civil War is passably adequate in its context,— and at the same time suffers from the failure to follow through and relate the consequent revolution in public opinion that alone made the Fourteenth Amendment possible. The Amendment and its genesis are hardly men-

tioned. This neglect is characteristic of the treatment that accompanies the oversimplied and terribly misleading formula that says that Andrew Johnson on his accession "accepted Lincoln's plan" of Reconstruction. The stereotypes of "carpetbagger" and "scalawag" are preserved with only the slightest softening of the reference. A major weakness is the domination of the pamphlet by the story of Slavery and the Civil War/Reconstruction to such an extent that the story of race relations from 1877 to the 1960s is offered as but a hasty epilogue to what has gone before.

In its treatment of slavery, the slaves, and the abolitionist movement, the Detroit presentation is rather commendable. While not, perhaps, as complete a statement as one would like to see, or sufficiently related to the problems of the present day (could any school board ever go so far?) the discussion of the abolitionists does stress the integrated character of the Movement of the 1850s, suggests its heroic qualities, and refrains from the usual banal pejorative reference to Garrison. The reaction of men enslaved is admirably outlined: resistance is the keynote; resistance by slowdown and inefficiency, as well as by rebellion or escape. The approach to the origins of North American slavery is well done: instead of the characteristic pro-slavery presentation which portrays slavery in the United States as a normal, almost inevitable sequel to the slave systems of Greece and Rome, there is an accurate economic analysis. It is shown how slavery, in the West, had been replaced by serfdom even that was coming to be ameliorated, when the economic opportunities and needs of the new continent brought about a new form of slavery. The two phases of American bondage, its early development, and its burgeoning post-1790 growth, are attributed to the stimulus of enormous profit and the special character of a plantation society.

> The Negro now demands entry into a world, a society, that does not exist, except in ideology. In that world there is only one American community, and in that world, heritage, ethnicity, religion, race are only incidental and accidental personal characteristics. There may be many reasons for such a world to come into existence—among them the fact that it may be necessary in order to provide full equality for the Negroes. But if we do move in this direction, we will have to create communities very different from the kinds in which most of us who have already arrived—Protestants, Catholics, Jews—now live.
>
> —Nathan Glazer, December, 1964

In contrast to the realistic economic treatment in the Detroit book for children, the New York manual for teachers opens with a pedantic chronology of slavery in Ancient History, intended to convey (as, for example, Avery Craven did in his biography *Edmund Ruffin, Southerner*) an impression of continuity from Athens, Greece, to Athens, Georgia. As to the story of slavery in America, New York says: "All of the textbooks in United States history tell it and many tell it well," (p. 28); "The story of abolitionism is a long and hard fought crusade, and important details of its history may be found in almost all the textbooks," (p. 48) When one recalls that Lloyd Marcus' 1961 study for the Anti-Defamation League of the "Treatment of Minorities in Secondary School textbooks" found but one of 24 texts acceptable in its treatment of slavery, one wonders why the New York Deputy Superintendent's committee took such pains to extol existing texts. A glance at Louis Ruchames' "The Historian as a Special Pleader" in *The Nation*, November 24, 1962, or Martin B. Duberman's "The Abolitionists and Psychology" in the July, 1962 *Journal of Negro History* will help enlighten those who may be tempted to look at their textbooks for the "important details" of the story of abolitionism.

At an earlier point the New York pamphlet declares that "major practices and rationalizations associated with American Negro slavery originated" with "Old World" cultures, a misleading summary that obscures

the wholly indigenous character of the skincolor racism that became the outstanding rationalization. This presages the treatment in the pamphlet of development at the turn of the century,—a willingness to criticize the "South" while underplaying the character and extent of Northern racism and the nationwide complicity in the exclusion of the Negro from the mainstream of social and economic life.

The New York Curriculum Development Committee's handling of the issues of the Civil War and Reconstruction is, as is much of the rest of its work, a curious mixture of token truths ("In their fight for the Union, Negro soldiers had made the freedom of their people more certain") with preversely wrong-headed charterization which compel, on balance, an unfavorable judgment. "Abolitionism . . . helped to cause the Civil War" (p. 48); stress on Lincoln's "colonialization" views without an adequate presentation of the evolution of his thinking except to characterize it later as a "more radical position" (53, 4, 8); the Andrew Johnson myth is swallowed: "the new President quickly adopted Lincoln's Reconstruction plan with only minor changes" (63); during Confederate-dominated reconstruction the "state governments of the South began to set their own houses in order" (63-4; the phrase "home rule" as also used for the era of the Black codes, 68, as well as for the ultimate defeat of the first reconstruction, "the return of home rule to the South," 72); the joint congressional committee under Radical' Thaddeus Stevens "conducted an extensive investigation of conditions in the South,"—but we are not give a glimpse into what they found, 65; the Congress that enacted the first Reconstruction Act was "determined to deal harshly with the South" (66); "However crudely the 'carpetbaggers,' 'scalawags,' and freedmen ruled . . . " p. 69; ultimately we are told that Rutherford B. Hayes "alleviated Southern grief by promptly withdrawing the troops," (73) but not informed how he gained election.

The District of Columbia pamphlet, like the New York product, is meant primarily for teachers. There is no indication of the extent to which either system makes its discoveries of new truths available to the student. However, the retraining of teachers in this field certainly deserves a high order of priority and even were the new teaching materials entirely bias-free and the old textbooks discarded, no school system can offer better quality education than its teachers are equipped to present fairly. If, in another land, the problem of retraining 80,000 biology teachers is being faced, on the occasion of the final downfall of its political geneticist, we should be able to cope with the re-education of our history teachers. (A problem that must be faced if the Civil Rights revolution is to be completed in this generation is the remedial education of the rest of the adult population—the generations taught the historical notions that encouraged belief in white supremacy) the always quotable James Baldwin observed of this aspect of the problem "instead of talking about giving Negroes preferential treatment, talk about giving *white* people preferential treatment for the purpose of enabling them to learn their own history," (*Commentary*, March, 1964.)

In its handling of the problem under review—to the extent that it is really capable of being handled without a total textbook overhaul—the District of Columbia supplement is most acceptable. Lacking, in parts, a satisfactory writing style, and marred in others by absence of a sense of organization, it has much less to criticize in its content than the New York counterpart. One cannot help but feel that the differences are attributable to District's willingness to accept the aid of the published and human resources of the A.S.N.L.H. and New York's jealous resentment at interference or suggestions from outside the system that hampers dialogue between the headquarters bureaucracy and those whom it will not admit are more qualified. The District pamphlet does not shrink at saying of slavery:

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"Its establishment was the conscious choice of men who wished to exploit the economic resources of the area;" of the faults of the founding fathers: "Property, in their opinion, was the basis of government;" of the annexation of Florida that significant was the desire to "re-enslave runaway slaves;" that the Civil War became "the second step in America's march toward the goal of human freedom;" the sole serious slip in the treatment of this period being the reference to Andrew Johnson as "following essentially the reconstruction policies of his predecessor."

Partisans of the Negro History movement who have always been dissenters for truth and justice will be understandably pleased with the New York and Detroit booklets, as well as the District of Columbia pamphlet. Ignored for so long, not only outside, but very often within the "movement" and frustrated in their repeated efforts to expose the roots of racism, they will be tempted to accept the bundles of token truths as a significant breakthrough,— and so, to a very large extent they are. There is material and a point of view in the New York book that is undoubtedly affirmative in its dealing with the current period; it is in conformity with the official attitude of the Establishment that favors civil rights, at least as a concept.

Yet it would be incorrect to be satisfied, even though it is understandable that we should be pleased. Partial truth is no more acceptable, after all, than partial freedom. The whole truth is the objective of the Negro History movement. As the late Albert N. D. Brooks wrote in the March, 1964 *Negro History Bulletin:* Not only the destroying of sterotypes and myths, but "stimulating systematic study of the true historic causes of low socio-economic status, to the end that plans and programs for the present and future will produce freedom and equality." Or, as the ubiquitous Mr. Baldwin stated,

"It doesn't demand a vast amount of preception to discover why *you* are not in the history books. And you realize that if *you* are not in the history books, a great many other things must be left out of the history books too . . . . "

This old idea of succeeding on your individual merits keeps the issue clouded. This means the cream of the crop will get ahead but it doesn't help the masses. If you want to help them, you must fight for an integrated society.

—Rep. Paul Boswell,
Illinois state legislator,
December 12, 1964